DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 299 765 EC 211 044

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TITLE Address to the Council for Exceptional Children by the U.S. Secretary of Education.
INSTITUTION Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 30 Mar 88
NOTE 11p.; Speech presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (66th, Washington, DC, March 28-April 1, 1988).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disabilities; *Educational Methods; *Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; Expectation; Mainstreaming; Normalization (Handicapped); Opinions; Parent Participation; Program Effectiveness; *Special Education; Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Effective Schools Research

ABSTRACT

In this speech, the Secretary of Education identifies characteristics and principles common to all good schools including strong institutional and instructional leadership, a safe and orderly learning environment, teaching of the basics, high expectations, assessment of student progress, and accountability. Such principles are seen to apply equally to handicapped and non-handicapped students. Stressed are the importance of involving parents in decisions, the coordination of regular and special education services, the need to make adaptations to accommodate the most severely handicapped students in regular education settings, and the importance of early intervention and preschool services. Concerns of quality of educational programming are highlighted now that access to educational services has been improved. (DB)

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THE SECRETARY

FOR RELEASE: 9:30 A.M. (EST)
Wednesday, March 30, 1988

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WILLIAM J. BENNETT

U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

Address to the Council for Exceptional Children

Convention Center
Washington, D.C.
March 30, 1988

EC 211044

I would like to begin my remarks this morning by paying tribute to members of this audience for your efforts on behalf of children with special educational needs. In the face of sometimes difficult circumstances, you have cast your lot on the side of hope -- in the belief that the human spirit, committed adults, and a sound educational program can improve the quality of life of all children.

Five years ago the publication of A Nation at Risk -- the celebrated report by the National Commisssion on Excellence in Education -- helped give birth to an education reform movement that has generated a renewed commitment to excellence, character, and fundamentals. The American people are now engaged in the long struggle to rebuild an educational system worthy of our ideals. Much remains to be done, but we have reason for optimism.

We are seeing the return in America's classrooms to the fundamental principles of effective education -- principles that research, common sense, and experience help to inform. I know of what I speak. During the last three years I have visited and taught in more than 90 schools around the country. One impression I have come away with is regardless of the particular circumstances, there are certain characteristics, certain principles, that are common to all good schools. Among them are strong institutional and instructional leadership, a safe and orderly learning environment, teaching of the basics, high expectations, assessment of student progress, and accountability.

My thesis today is that the principles that make for a good school for nonhandicapped students help make for a good school for handicapped students as well. This should not surprise us, for many of the strategies that schools use to create more effective school environments are in fact derived from special education. Some of the most effective ways to continuously monitor student progress can be found in special education practice. Similarly, direct instructional techniques, strategies for maximizing academic learning time, and effective classroom management systems are derived from special and regular education research and practice.

Of course there are distinctive ways to apply the principles of a sound education to handicapped students, and they should become part of our criteria for judging a school's effectiveness.

First, effective schools involve parents in decisions related to the education of their children -- and as partners in the provision of an individualized program for their child. Though we know that the participation of parents in school programs helps all children to learn more effectively, such involvement is particularly important for handicapped students.

Since passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, research has shown that educators can be taught to improve their ability to communicate with parents and to include parents actively in the decision-making

process. Similarly, parent centers have developed training procedures and support systems so that parents can participate directly and effectively in decisions related to their child's education.

Projects such as "Next Steps" at Penn State University demonstrate that parents can learn to monitor the quality of their child's Individualized Educational Program. The Parent Involvement Projects at the University of Kansas and the University of Virginia provide families with help in long-range planning for their children. Scores of research studies and demonstration projects have shown that parents can be effective teachers and managers of their children's behavior.

To create schools that are effective for all students -- handicapped and nonhandicapped -- we must overcome barriers that limit participation by parents. We must communicate to parents that they are critical, indispensable partners with the schools.

Second, effective schools coordinate regular and special education to accommodate the special learning needs of a broad range of students. They assure the consistency and cohesiveness of programs for students with handicaps by achieving coordination between special education, regular education, and related personnel in delivering services to students with handicaps. Experience has shown that when such coordination does <u>not</u> occur, special education may provide

instruction that not only is unrelated to, but may even be in conflict with, the instruction provided by teachers of nonhandicapped students. Some schools are experimenting with modifying the classroom to meet the needs of mainstreamed students with handicaps or to conduct special education in the regular classroom.

At effective schools regular and special education work together to solve problems in teaching students with learning problems -- and prevent the erroneous classification of students who are not handicapped but have special learning needs. A wide variety of models of pre-referral teams that include regular educators, special educators, and related service personnel have been implemented in districts across the nation. These have resulted in an increased capacity in schools to assist teachers in modifying instructional strategies, materials, and classroom management techniques to meet the needs of a broader range of students.

Third, effective schools make adaptations that accommodate the most severely handicapped students in regular education settings.

A final characteristic of effective schools is that they offer early intervention and preschool services. Early intervention services are critically important for children with disabilities and their families. The need for these services is based on a growing body of scientific evidence that clearly shows their importance and benefits. Research

and demonstration projects with young children with Downs Syndrome, social withdrawal, severe disruptive behaviors, and so forth have shown us that we can lessen the negative impact of that disability and teach parents to improve the academic and social development of their children. Perhaps equally important, educating together young children of all kinds (handicapped and nonhandicapped) sets the stage for later cooperative efforts in schools among children, teachers, administrators, and parents.

* * * *

These, then, are some of the principles and findings that should inform our work with children who are handicapped. The nation's schools have just over ten years of experience in implementing the Education of All Handicapped Children Act. There is much for which special education can be proud. The field has been successful in identifying and serving children with handicaps and gaining broad public acceptance of the role of schools in serving children with disabilities. Few large-scale Federal programs can claim similar success in creating nationwide access to services.

Challenges of access do remain. Extension of services to younger children with handicaps; accommodating students with disabilities whose English proficiency is limited; and identifying and serving students with severe behavior disorders are some examples. Nevertheless, the issue of access is only one focus of our efforts. It is time to look

beyond access and begin to reflect on the question: Access to what? Access needs to be access to quality, to something substantial, to something worthwhile. Like the rest of education, programs to educate children with handicaps must demonstrate that they do, in fact, prepare students to live, work, and succeed in our society. Achieving access to schooling has been important, but access without quality is insufficient. We must insist on realistic assessment and accountability. We must focus the attention of special education on quality, on what students with disabilities get from school.

Too many American students -- including students who are handicapped -- are not learning enough simply because of a mistaken belief that they cannot or will not learn. These are the doubts that make a prescription for inaction, a self-fulfilling prophecy of despair. There are doubts, for example, that children even with certain types of limited handicaps can truly be educated and make useful contributions. These doubts are faithless. These doubts are dangerous. And, in fact, these doubts are false.

They are proven false each day in schools all over America. I have seen some of these schools. In each one, dedicated teachers are proving that a thing can be done by doing it. They do not look at their students and see categories to which the basic principles of good education do not or cannot apply. They see children -- our children -- to

whom time-tested principles of good education always apply, and apply completely. These are teachers of power and conviction and perseverance. They can make all the difference in a student's life.

Our schools simply cannot be governed by stereotypes associated with circumstance -- sterotypes that encourage us to ask and expect too little from our students, including handicapped students. If we are serious about equal opportunity in general, then we must provide equal opportunity in school. And we should remember that all children tend to perform according to our expectations of them. Let's not sell them short.

You've been a very patient audience; allow me to conclude with a few brief, personal reflections. We have long known and have long said that what is critical to the development of a child's character is self-esteem. It's a much-cited term. Now by self-esteem, I mean a child's proud sense of himself, of his abilities and accomplishments; a sense of pride and hope about who and what he is, can be, and wants to be. But self-esteem cannot be imparted to a child by simply calling it forth, by simply saying "Have self-esteem." To do so is artificial and unconvincing -- above all, I would point out, to the child himself.

In the end, a child gains self-esteem by doing things that in his eyes -- and in the eyes of those who care for him -- are worthy of esteem. For a handicapped child, that may

mean completing what to others may seem to be a simple task. The joy -- the look of pleasure and pride in the face of a handicapped child who has undertaken a difficult task and triumphed -- reminds us of the kinds of things that are worthy of us as human beings. It instills hope. It wipes away cynicism. In its way, it speaks to a special kind of excellence and achievement -- and of courage. It encourages us about life.

Second, I have said before that while not every teacher is a parent, every parent is a teacher -- a child's first teacher, a child's all but indispensable teacher. This is particularly applicable of parents of children with handicaps. The bond that often exists between them -- forged under sometimes difficult and poignant circumstances -- speaks to the deepest kind of love and commitment. It reminds us of what it means to be a parent: the frustrations, the responsibilities, and in the end, the great triumphs and joy.

A final impresssion is how important <u>work</u> is to a child or young adult with a handicap; the pleasure of being in the work force, of contributing, of being involved in an important enterprise. Persons with handicaps often take pride in their jobs that the rest of should match, but too rarely do. Here too, these children teach us an important lesson.

These fundamental truths are truths of rich simplicity, truths of the commonplace. They remind us again that the education of children with handicaps is an unfinished task.

It is to that task that we must direct our best efforts. Together we can meet the challenge. On our efforts rests nothing less than the quality of life of our children.